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ABSTRACT

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"You'd be wanting to know about the past": Social contexts of children's historical understanding in Northern Ireland and the United States

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of differing social contexts on the historical understanding of primary and elementary students in Northern Ireland and the United States. Although children in both locations learn about the past not only at school but from relatives, historic sites, literature, and the media, the U.S. emphasis on a narrative of national development leads students to emphasize inventions, rational progress, and individual achievements in attempting to explain change over time. Primary students in Northern Ireland, however, encounter history not as a story of national development but as a series of portrayals of social and material life in other times and places; as a result, they are more likely to explain historical change in terms of economic factors, legal and institutional developments, or changing fashions. U.S. students conclude that the purpose of learning history is to understand themselves and the national community with which they identify; primary students in Northern Ireland think history is important to learn about people who are different than themselves.

"You'd be wanting to know about the past": Social contexts of children's historical understanding in Northern Ireland and the United States

An undergraduate in teacher education once asked me whether students in other countries study U.S. history in fifth and eighth grades as we do here. I was taken aback that anyone imagined U.S. history was a universal topic of study, and I told her—hopefully without too much condescension—that children in other countries learn about their own histories, not ours. Little did I realize how misleading my answer was. I thought students everywhere learned about their countries' histories the way those in the U.S. learn about theirs—as a story of national development, focusing on the origin and development of modern society and the state. Like my student, I uncritically generalized from an image of history developed within the American context: I assumed the only significant variation in learning history from one country to another—in addition to differences in content—lay in the relative degrees of patriotism or critical reflection involved in the subject. As I know now, the differences can run much deeper than that.

People everywhere care about history. Both individuals and groups use history as a fundamental means of making sense of the human condition. But not everyone uses history the same way, for not everyone has the same set of concerns about humanity. People's understanding of the past varies depending on their perception of the social purposes of knowing history, as well as on the cultural contexts in which they have learned about the topic. Learning history can never be a purely objective or academic subject, both because contemporary social relations shape the meaning people attribute to the past, and because people have access to historical knowledge and interpretations other than those produced by professional historians. Indeed, even academic history is bound up with the perspectives and concerns of the wider society, and these forces inevitably influence the products of

historical research. Understanding historical thinking, then, means examining the social contexts in which that thinking takes place.

Research with children in the U.S. reveals a substantial body of shared historical knowledge and understanding. Despite some variations arising from national and ethnic backgrounds, students in the U.S. exhibit a surprisingly high level of agreement on many of the most basic aspects of history—including the nature of evidence, the direction of historical change, the role of individuals in bringing about change, and the purpose of learning history. But as widely shared as these perspectives may be in the U.S., they differ fundamentally in other parts of the world. The study reported here—based on three months of classroom observation and interviews with over a hundred and twenty children in Northern Ireland—points to important differences in each of these dimensions of historical understanding. These differences arise from variations in the sources of historical knowledge children are exposed to in the U.S. and Northern Ireland, as well as from differences in the uses of history in the two societies.

Background and Research Procedures

In many respects, primary schools in Northern Ireland are little different than elementary schools in the United States: A U.S. visitor walking into a classroom there would be hard pressed to identify many ostensible differences in the setup or organization of the room, the systems of management or discipline, the kinds of resources used, the patterns of interaction among students or between students and teachers, or in the overall climate of the school. (And just as in the U.S., there is a wide range of variation on each of these dimensions.) Indeed, some educators there told me that schools in Northern Ireland had been greatly influenced by the U.S. educational system; one teacher who had worked in a U.S. school found the greatest difference to lie in the larger number of personnel available in the U.S. to help students with special needs. Two differences critical for

understanding comparisons between the systems, though, are the structure of student enrollment and the content of the history curriculum.

Student enrollment

Children in Northern Ireland begin school at least one year earlier than kindergartners in the United States (and many also attend a year of Nursery School before that). Beginning with the first compulsory year of school at age 4, grade levels are designated as Primary 1, Primary 2, and so on. Although the first years of primary school include an element of structured play, they also contain a significant degree of academic content, and students are expected to enter P3 (the equivalent of Grade 1) already able to read. Because the cut-off date for entrance into P1 is June 30 (rather than the typical September 30 in the U.S.) students at any given grade level will be 25 percent older—and will have been in school one or two years longer—than their U.S. counterparts. Students remain in Primary School through P7; the first year of secondary schooling is usually referred to as Year 8. In examining this research, then, it is critical for readers to translate grade levels into their equivalents on the other side of the Atlantic—thus Primary 4 in Northern Ireland is equivalent to Grade 2 in the United States, and so on. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Grade level comparisons

Age	United States	Northern Ireland
3	Preschool	Nursery
4	Preschool	Primary 1 (P1)
5	Kindergarten	Primary 2 (P2)
6	Grade 1	Primary 3 (P3)
7	Grade 2	Primary 4 (P4)
8	Grade 3	Primary 5 (P5)
9	Grade 4	Primary 6 (P6)
10	Grade 5	Primary 7 (P7)
11	Grade 6	Year 8

Most schools in Northern Ireland are attended by a population of students who are either exclusively Protestant or exclusively Catholic (or nearly so). Those attended mainly by Protestants are known as *controlled schools* and are under the management of local education authorities, and those attended mainly by Catholics are known as *maintained schools* and are managed by the Catholic church. Although both controlled and maintained schools are officially open to children of all denominations, in practice few students (particularly at the elementary level) attend schools in which the majority are a different religion than themselves. A small number of schools in Northern Ireland are *integrated schools* and are attended in roughly equal numbers by students of each religious tradition; although the number of students attending integrated schools is small—approximately 3 percent of the population—they constitute a rapidly growing sector of the educational system. All three types of schools are funded by the government of the United Kingdom, and all follow the guidelines of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

History curriculum and instruction

The study of history begins earlier in Northern Ireland schools than in the United States, although it does not necessarily play a larger part in the curriculum. As in the U. S., educators in Northern Ireland are quick to point out that history has a lower status than reading, language and mathematics, and that it occupies a much smaller portion of the curriculum than those subjects. Contributing to the lower status of history is the "11 plus exam," as it is usually known: Midway through the last year of primary school, students take a standardized test to determine their eligibility for selective grammar schools; because of the strongly differentiated secondary educational system, these tests have an enormous impact on students' future academic careers and thus have a controlling influence on primary instruction—and the tests do not include history. As a result, schools have little incentive to devote more time to the subject than the required minimum. In addition, most

P7 classrooms spend the first part of the year preparing for the selection exams, and those students usually do not study any history until the second term.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum requires the study of history at all levels. But while students in the earliest grades may occasionally compare aspects of past and present—chores, pastimes, and so on—or create simple family trees, formal study of the subject begins in P4, when students study a specific time period through a unit such as "Life in the Recent Past," involving comparisons of life in the 1940s/1950s with life today, or "Life during the War," focusing on the effect of World War II on daily life in Northern Ireland. Each year from P5 to P7, classrooms engage in a history unit required by the Northern Ireland Curriculum: each unit typically lasts about one term (half the school year), with between sixty and ninety minutes spent on the unit each week. In P5, students study "Life in Early Times," which focuses on the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods in Ireland; P6 students study "The Vikings," which focuses on the nature of Viking society in Scandinavia and the impact of Viking raiders and settlers on Ireland and elsewhere; the required P7 unit is "Life in Victorian Times," which includes the lives of people in both town and country at different levels of society in Britain and Ireland. As part of each year's unit, classes also study a supplemental topic, usually based on the teacher's interest or background or the availability of resources. Among the most popular supplemental topics are the Ancient Egyptians, the Famine, and "line of development" studies such as the history of transportation.

Classroom instruction in history also differs from that in the U.S. Most notably, there are no U.S.–style history textbooks. Rather, students work on a variety of activities which center around the topic of the unit—Ancient Egyptians, Viking Life, and so on. Sometimes this involves reading or listening to short texts (often one or two pages per day) and discussing them, but most of students' time is devoted to working on handouts related to the readings or on short group or individual projects. The handouts I saw students working on were usually fairly easy, and most students completed them in twenty or thirty

minutes with minimal assistance; their content ranged from sequencing pictures (such as a series of Mesolithic hunting activities), to drawing pictures of how people now and in the past met basic needs, to looking at photographs and making inferences (about schools in the 1950s, for instance). Among the projects I observed or that students told me about were building Vikings ships, making World War II ration cards, writing diary entries from the perspective of a Viking woman, bringing artifacts from home and describing them to the class, and "excavating" the school rubbish bin to reach conclusions about the day's activities. Individually, each of these activities would seem very familiar to U.S. educators, but taken together the pattern of instruction differs from that in the U.S. both because it does not revolve around a single textbook and because students are not asked to recall or look up factual information—there is nothing like filling in blanks or answering questions at the end of chapters.

Research procedures

This study relied on two principal research methods. The first involved open-ended, semi-structured interviews with students from P3 to Y8. In each interview, I showed students a set of pictures either from the last 200 years or the last 10,000 years, asked them to arrange the pictures in chronological order, to explain the reasons for their placements, and finally to estimate when each picture was. I followed this task with a set of more general questions about history; these included asking students what aspects of life had changed over time and why, how people know how life was different in the past, why history is important, and where they had learned about the past. (See Appendix A for the complete interview protocol.) I frequently probed students' answers or asked additional questions to follow up on issues that arose during interviews.

I interviewed 121 students in grades P3 through Y8 during a total of 60 interviews at four separate schools. Two were integrated schools (one primary and one secondary), one was a controlled school and one was a maintained school. At each school, the faculty

were asked to select students who represented the range of abilities in their classrooms and who would not be afraid to talk to a stranger. Interviews were conducted during school hours, usually in libraries or other quiet rooms of the building, and nearly all students were open and talkative and appeared comfortable during interviews; because of the influence of U.S. television, students had no trouble understanding my accent, although the reverse was not always the case. (The number of students interviewed at each grade and at each school can be found in Appendix B.)

In addition to interviewing students, I conducted classroom observations in grades P4, P5, and P6 at the integrated primary school; I observed most of the history lessons taught in the school during approximately a three month period, for a total of 38 observations (including two field trips related to history). Because students spent the majority of instructional time working on individual or group assignments, I also had innumerable opportunities to talk to students during these observations. Combining interviews with classroom observations had the obvious advantage of allowing comparisons of students' responses to what they had learned in class, as well as the chance to ask questions about the content that arose in the course of instruction.[1] During six months of residence in Northern Ireland, I also collected information in many other history-related settings so that I could place students' learning in its broadest possible context; these included museums and history parks, secondary history classrooms, university courses for preservice history teachers, and meetings of local history associations, as well as discussions with primary and secondary teachers, resource specialists and administrators in the Northern Ireland Department of Education, museum curators, and university education faculty.

[1]My interactions with students in classrooms also made them more comfortable in interviews, so I was able to probe their answers much more extensively than I was with students at the other schools. In addition, my daughter was enrolled in the school in which I was observing, so I was personally familiar with many of the children, their siblings, and their parents, all of which made them even more willing to talk during interviews.

All three schools were in rural areas far from Belfast, Northern Ireland's major urban center, but taken together they provided an interesting mixture of locations within the region. The integrated schools were in a district with a large town and several small and medium villages, and students came from throughout this area; although roughly equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics were enrolled, all came from communities which were predominantly Protestant. Both the controlled and maintained schools were in small villages, one predominantly Protestant, one Catholic, and both drew exclusively from their immediate surroundings. Economically, all schools enrolled students from a wide variety of backgrounds, but one included a large portion of children whose parents were middle-class professionals; families at another were much poorer and included a high proportion of farmers, skilled or unskilled laborers, and the unemployed; the third school fell between these two extremes.

The schools also reflected a variety of experiences related to Northern Ireland's political violence. Two were in an area that relies heavily on tourism and which puts a premium on nonconflictual community relations; students there had little direct experience with violence, although some of their parents had moved from Belfast or Londonderry to escape the Troubles. ("Little direct experience" is a relative term, for the town experienced a destructive bombing of its city centre within the lifetime of students in this study). Another school was in an area described as having good community relations, and most students there had no direct experience of conflict, but their village was also near a town which in the 1980s experienced one of the most deadly bombings in the region's history, and the ten-year anniversary of the event occurred just before interviews with students; the village was also situated near the border with the Irish Republic, a location that tends to make residents more aware of the political situation. Students at the third school had the most direct experience with conflict, for they lived in a village which has been at the center of a highly controversial annual march for several years; students there were well aware of political violence, and the discovery of explosives in a local barn resulted in the evacuation

of a portion of the town the weekend before these interviews. Students in these schools thus represented a variety of the backgrounds and expriences of rural Northern Ireland.

Findings

Settings for learning history

The range of settings in which students in Northern Ireland had learned about history was remarkably similar to that in U.S: in both, students learn about history many places other than at school, and their knowledge of the past far exceeds the amount of formal instruction they receive in the topic (Barton, 1994; Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin, 1993; Levstik and Barton, 1996). Indeed, since systematic study of history usually begins only in fourth or fifth grade in the U.S., younger students' knowledge derives almost entirely from sources outside the classroom. The most important of these are children's own families: U.S. students report that parents, grandparents, and other relatives have told them about their own lives, about how life was different in the past, and about specific historical topics such as World War II, the U.S. Civil Rights movement, or the Vietnam War. A second key source of information is the media: Much of students' knowledge of history comes from movies and television programs—both fictional narratives set in the past and documentaries or dramatizations of specific historic events. Many students also explain that they have learned about the topic from historic sites, either locations in their own communities or places they have visited as part of family vacations. And finally, some students have learned about history through independent reading, particularly works of historical fiction they have chosen on their own initiative.

The Northern Ireland in this study reported learning about history in much the same way as students in the U.S. In nearly every interview, students identified family members as important sources of their knowledge; the following quotes provide typical examples of their comments:

> My granddad was born about 60 years ago and teaches me a lot about how it was a long time ago. (P3 Sophie)
>
> My great-granddad, he's in his 90s, and he tells me about his history, he tells about the olden times, he tells really exciting things. (P3 Joshua)
>
> My granny, sometimes she tells me about whenever she was a little girl. (P4 Bruce)
>
> I know something about the world war 'cause my granny's got a few like wee daggers and rucksacks from it, and her husband was in the world war. (P5 Jake)
>
> I go to my granny's, and she tells me about the wars. (P6 Jeffrey)
>
> My dad tells me a lot. I like hearing about whenever he was little, and he tells me lots of things that have changed, like people weren't as rich. And dad used to get caned a lot. (P6 Siobhán)
>
> I've learned about a lot from my family, 'cause both my great–grandfathers went to the first [world] war, and one of them was killed and he was nineteen, and he's buried between Belgium and France." (Y8 Sheila)

Nor did students learn only about the direct experiences of their relatives; several reported hearing about topics older siblings were studying in primary or secondary school or at university, and others recounted learning about subjects their parents were particularly interested in (often the world wars). P6 Nuala explained, "My granny tells me—my cousin's birthday is on Guy Fawkes Day—and I keep on asking her, 'What's Guy Fawkes Day?' and she always tells me what it is."[2]

Historical sites were the second most frequently mentioned source of knowledge, and these were mentioned far more often than among students in the U.S. Northern Ireland has three major outdoor historical parks with extensive reconstructions of historic and prehistoric settlements, and all the schools in this study were within about a two hour drive of at least two of them. Many students had been to one or more of these history parks, either as part of a school trip or a family visit, and others had been on similar outings to major institutions such as Belfast's Ulster Museum or to smaller museums or historic sites throughout Northern Ireland (and in a few cases, in England or the Republic or Ireland).

[2]Students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

As P7 Stuart said, "Me and my family usually go out for an outing on Sunday, like to Devenish Island, and I learn a lot of history then." Students consistently recounted these trips with interest and enthusiasm; remembering a school trip the year before, P4 Emily exclaimed, "The Transport Museum, that was brilliant!"

Students also frequently mentioned learning about history from books, television, and videos. Sometimes they gave specific examples—P7 Ronan mentioned a *Horrible Histories* book he had read about the Aztecs, P3 Morna repeatedly referred to the video *Oliver Twist*, and a number of students remembered *Spywatch* videos they had watched at school in previous years. More often, though, students talked about such sources in general terms. P6 Chelsea, for example, said, "I find things out in books." P5 Victoria said, "My nanny's got a book about this time," and several students mentioned getting history books from the library. P6 Dylan also said that he had learned about history from "programs when I was sick, off school," and P6 Reece noted, "In the holidays there's lots of programs on about it [history], and sometimes if we're off school cause we're sick we might watch the programs about it." Despite their frequent lack of specific examples, students were confident of the importance of these sources; as P5 Desmond said, "I wouldn't have known anything about these kind of pictures only for TV, really."

Also like children in the U.S., these students were neither passive nor reluctant participants in the process of learning about history. In interviews, only one student said he didn't think history was interesting (two others said it depended on the topic). Nor did students did simply answer "yes" when asked if they were interested in history—they brought up their interest in the topic before being asked, they gave examples of how they had pursued that interest, and they described themselves as consciously interested in and knowledgeable about history. In each of the following quotes, students describe themselves as having an active and on-going interests in learning about the past; the first three are from P3 students who have never studied the topic at school:

> I'm very interested in olden day stuff, and it's interesting to go back, to go that far back...because it feels like you're going back and you're actually walking in those olden day streets, like in a time machine. (P3 Morna)
>
> I'm trying to learn history because I'm going to be a scientist when I grow up. (P3 Sophie)
>
> I'm really interested about a long time ago, and I wish I went to a class that talked more about history. (P3 Sineád)
>
> I like hearing about a long time ago...I like to learn a lot about history. (P4 Samantha)
>
> I think it's interesting because I like hearing about old people and how they lived and how they made houses and things like that. (P5 Dustin)
>
> It's a lot to learn, and it keeps you very amused when you're listening. (P5 Hayley)
>
> I love hearing about old fashioned, and the olden days, I just love it. (P6 Siobhán)

Students not only liked history—or *loved* it, as several said—they actively sought to learn more. Several said they checked out books on history from the library, and while observing in classrooms I often noticed that students had history books at their desks for independent reading. Students' interest was particularly keen when parents and grandparents were involved; they did not just hear about the past from them, they actively sought out their knowledge. P5 Maura explained, "My daddy always watches films about them [historical times]," and she asks him "different things that happened long time ago—he's very old—I ask Daddy wee questions about what happened long times ago, and why they happened." Similarly, P5 Hayley said, "I've learned history at my nanny's when I asked her why have things changed from a long time ago till now." Students often recounted these interactions with enthusiasm. P3 Sineád said she liked looking at pictures from "the olden days," and explained, "I've been lucky, I have lots of photographs in albums, and my dad's been talking a lot about it." P5 Joanna excitedly told me how "you would go in a car to a long journey, especially Daddy goes, I talk with Daddy about this, and he says, 'Whenever we were young we had to,' like, 'make up our room,' or 'make our own money, and be gathering spuds and all.'" And P6 Shannon said her mom "used to

live up in Cloughmills, and it used to be a really, really small town, and you could go everywhere you wanted, and they had to make fun for theirselves...I like hearing about it when all the lights go out."

The similarities between the settings in which students in Northern Ireland and the U.S. had learned about history reflect the extensive parallels between the two societies. Children in Northern Ireland enjoy close and familiar relations with parents and grandparents, and the geographic stability of most families ensures that children there have many opportunities to talk to the older relatives in their families. As in the U.S., television is a nearly universal feature of the home; cable connections and videocassette recorders are less widespread, but are by no means uncommon—children who do not have them in their own homes are likely to watch at the homes of friends or relatives. School libraries are comparable—if somewhat smaller—than those in the U.S., and every medium-sized town in Northern Ireland has its own public library with a children's section; bookmobiles serve smaller communities. The greater frequency with which students in Northern Ireland mentioned having visited historic sites reflects the importance of tourism—and specifically historic and heritage tourism—to the Northern Ireland economy; children there have easy access to a number of extensive and well designed museums and historic sites within a small geographic region. Beneath these similarities in settings, though, lay fundamental differences in the nature of what children learned.

Historical evidence

One of the most obvious differences in the historical understanding of children in the U.S. and Northern Ireland lay in their familiarity with historical evidence. U.S. students have a notoriously weak understanding of historical evidence—they don't know what kind of sources are used in developing historical accounts, they have few skills for analyzing such sources, and they do not recognize the interpretive nature of history. Research with elementary students, for example, shows that they believe historical

information is transmitted through word of mouth; reflecting the family contexts in which they themselves have learned about the past, they assume that all historical knowledge is passed down in this way, and that our knowledge of the distance past derives from people long ago telling their grandchildren, who told their grandchildren, who told their grandchildren, and so on (Barton, 1993, 1997b). Their weaknesses in this area are certainly not insurmountable, for studies show that with instruction, elementary students can better recognize both the variety of sources used in history and the interpretive nature of historical accounts (Barton, 1997b; Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin, 1992b). U.S. students, however, rarely receive such instruction, and studies of secondary students highlight students' lack of familiarity with the nature of historical evidence (Epstein, 1994; Gabella, 1993; Wineburg, 1991, 1992).

The Northern Ireland students in this study, on the other hand, were quick to identify a greater range of sources of historical evidence. As in the U.S., many thought that people know about the past through word of mouth. Y8 Chloe, for example, said, "It's always passed on from someone who died earlier on," and P6 Louise suggested that "Your granny could tell you." P5 Nathan even remembered the term for this process: He explained that people know about the past because of "word of mouth, I think it's called, when people pass on the word in families." Several students echoed the comments of their U.S. counterparts by describing an unending chain of oral transmission; as P6 Scott said, "the ones that lived a long time ago passed it on to their son, and their son's son passed it on, they kept on passing it on, and they told somebody else, and they told another person." Similarly, P4 Emily observed, "Your mummy tells you what it was like then, and her mummy tells her what it was like, and her mummy tells her"—repeating the pattern as she pointed to each of the pictures in front of her.

But fewer than a fourth of students identified word of mouth as the sole means of learning about the past; nearly all the rest pointed to various forms of evidence as the way people in the present discover what happened in history. As P3 Morna said, "They keep

going and looking for clues"; similarly, P6 Chelsea noted, "Archaeologists find things from the past that tell us lots of things about it," and P6 Leanne observed, "People find remains, and they started to study, and they started to find out what kind of life they had, the way they made their things." Several students gave more specific examples of the kinds of remains used: P7 Carla said that "they find things, fossils and photographs, and old clothes and things people wore," Y8 Colin noted that "they've uncovered and found remains of buildings, and bones of people," and P5 Victoria said, "There's archaeologists, and they will dig up and find like scrolls and bits of jugs and all, or maybe even ruins of the wall or house or whatever." In several cases, students pointed to both physical evidence and word of mouth as means for learning about the past; Y8 Sheila, for example, first said that people "told stories about it" and "passed it on from generation to generation," but when asked for other ways, she added, "The evidence, like bones, and you can see chain mail, swords, axes, and then bones of dead animals and stuff that they would have eaten."

These responses indicate that even young children in Northern Ireland have a much greater knowledge of the range of historical evidence than those in the U.S. This difference is easy to explain, for students' experiences both in and out of school provide an explicit awareness of these sources. Learning about evidence is a fundamental goal of history instruction in Northern Ireland; in the official curriculum, the first of the "Approaches to History" relates to evidence:

> By providing opportunities to investigate a range of historical sources (including pictures, photographs, objects, artefacts, written sources, buildings and site visits, and museum reconstructions) pupils will begin to recognise the importance of evidence in piecing together our knowledge of the past and that it can be done in different ways. (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 1996, p. 2)

In each of the classrooms I observed, students directly learned about such sources. In the P6 classroom, for example, the teacher frequently mentioned specific archaeological finds which yielded information on Viking life, and he even told students about his own experience as part of a excavation which uncovered the remains of an Irish monastery's

round tower (used in part as protection against Viking raids). The P5 classroom began its study of history by excavating the school's rubbish bin and drawing conclusions about recent school activities; the class also went on a field trip that included a visit to a prehistoric burial site. And P4 students learned about evidence by bringing in artifacts from the 1940s and 1950s as part of their study of the recent past; a handout also required them to analyze a photograph from the period in order to reach conclusions about schooling at the time. Students at the other schools reported similar experiences with historical evidence.

Nor were these activities simply isolated activities, completed and forgotten, or divorced from the bulk of the content that students learned. Rather, discussions of evidence were a frequent feature of instruction, as students saw, touched, visited, or read about the sources of the information they were learning. Evidence played such a large part in the study of history not only because it was required by the official curriculum, but because the specific content of instruction made it a particularly meaningful and accessible topic. As noted earlier, the primary curriculum in Northern Ireland focuses on social and material life, and these are aspects of history that are particularly well illuminated through artifacts, pictures, and other forms of physical evidence. In addition, many of the time periods covered in primary schools—the Mesolithic Era, Ancient Egypt, the Vikings—are ones we know about largely or exclusively through archeological evidence, and thus the role of physical remains is much more salient in studying these periods; World War II and the post-war era, meanwhile, are so recent that artifacts are readily accessible. The focus both on these time periods and on social and material life makes it easy for teachers to highlight the role of evidence.

Students' experiences outside school reinforced this familiarity. Any of the students in this study could see numerous examples of historic physical remains within a few miles of their homes or schools; such sites included Neolithic burial sites or stone circles, round towers from medieval monasteries, the earthworks of Norman forts, and castles, abbeys, and churches in various states of ruin. As Y8 Susan explained, "We can see evidence of

settlement up at Ballyreagh," and P7 Róisín explained that "McEwan's cairn, along the road, it was excavated."[3] Such sites are neither scarce nor inaccessible—they are the inescapable landmarks of any drive from town to town in Northern Ireland. When P6 Jeffrey explained that we know about the past because "the scientists found bones, castles, houses—like bits and pieces left—and they put them back together," he was not simply relating an academic fact learned in school, he was describing his immediate environment.

Change over time

One of the least studied aspects of children's historical thinking is their understanding of how and why the lives of people have changed over time. Even young children know that life was different in the past than it is now, but when asked why it has changed they often struggle for an explanation—they appear to have little experience in school or out trying to account for the forces that lead to change. For the purposes of research, this lack of experience is a distinct advantage: Because children have not rehearsed a set of "correct" explanations, patterns in their responses shed light on the factors that influence their thinking. When faced with novel questions about why life has changed, children have to create answers on the spot, and the choices they make in developing these explanations point to the historical forces that have the most salience for them. The research reported here provides information on three aspects of Northern Ireland children's understanding of change over time—why material culture has changed, why social relationships have changed, and the overall direction of historical change.

Changes in material culture. In the only study to examine U.S. children's understanding of the reasons for historical change (Barton, 1996, 1997a), students relied heavily on factors such as "new inventions" or "coming up with new ideas" to explain why life is different now than in the past. For the fourth and fifth graders in that study, change

[3]Some location names have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to avoid revealing the location of the schools.

over time was a rational and beneficial process in which individuals developed inventions that improved nearly all aspects of life; they even attributed changes in fashion to improved technology and "better" clothes. Moreover, in explaining the rise of new technology, students focused on the motivations of individual inventors rather than on broader social or economic factors. They conceived of material and technological change almost entirely in terms of individual desires and achievements, rather than as a process bound up with the institutional forces of society.

Students in Northern Ireland gave explanations that overlapped with those of U.S. students, but they relied less exclusively on assertions of individual achievement or rational and beneficial progress. Like students in the U.S., those in Northern Ireland frequently pointed to the importance of inventions in changing people's way of life. Whenever they were asked why horses and carts were used instead of cars, for example, or why people in the past didn't use lights or radios or televisions, students gave the obvious explanation that those things hadn't been invented. They gave similar explanations for other changes; some thought that thatched roofs were used in the past because slate tiles didn't exist, and others explained that homes had been improved to make them stronger, or warmer, or to keep the water out. Also like students in the U.S., some overgeneralized the importance of inventions and credited them with brining about all changes in material life, including changes in fashion. P3 Sineád thought clothes were different in the past because "they just didn't have the material and the leather to make them"; similarly, P7 Stuart said, "They've found new materials, and they've found new ways to manufacture them," and P4 Bruce explained, "They've got better machines to make them."

But students in Northern Ireland were much more likely than U.S. students to identify reasons for change other than inventions, and much less likely to suggest that all change amounts to progress. About a fourth of students, for example, suggested that clothes have changed because people's ideas about what looks good have changed. P6 Benjamin though people wore different clothes in the past because "it was just fashion

then," and P5 Cody said, "It was a kind of a flashy style in that time, wearing clothes like that...They thought it was quite cool to wear that." Similarly, P5 Natasha noted that "the fashion's changed" and that "people don't like the same things all the time," and Y8 Sheila explained that clothes have changed because of the fashions and "what people thought they looked good in." While U.S. students also recognized that people in the past thought their own styles looked good, they nonetheless regarded stylistic changes as improvements; many of these Northern Ireland students, on the other hand, explicitly explained that changes in fashion were simply matters of preference.

Other students in Northern Ireland attributed material change to differing social and economic contexts. Some students, for example, noted that clothes were once made in the home, and now are bought in stores; P4 Kyle observed that clothes have changed because "we can buy our clothes at shops, we don't have to make our clothes," and P5 Nathan explained, "I think the clothes have changed because the people are getting richer and richer; the people back in those times would be just poor people, they had to make their own materials, but nowadays you can buy your own materials, so you can." This connection between changes in material life and changes in the level of poverty or affluence was a common one. P3 Sophie, for example, thought clothes were different in the past because "they didn't have very much money," and P4 Declan said, "I think they wear different clothes because they didn't have enough money to buy the clothes people wear nowadays." Suggesting a more explicit connection between wealth and clothing, P6 Eric explained that clothes have changed because "they were poorer and they had to use their clothes for a long time before they had enough money to go and buy more."

Several students used social and economic factors to explain changes in other areas of life as well. P6 Martin thought houses have changed because "they couldn't afford anything," and P4 Colm thought cars and roads had changed "because more people are richer and they've got more money to make more stuff." And about half of the students suggested more than one factor in accounting for changes in material life—these students

pointed to various combinations of social, economic, and technological developments. One such explanation is that of P5 Victoria; in the following quote she explains changing styles of hats by pointing to the interplay of technology, fashion, and economics:

> People have discovered, and they've done more things, and people have liked them and all, and it's gone into fashion and everybody does it and all. Everybody buys it, and the people who made the hats thought, "Well, let's do a new idea, because everybody's got the same kind of hat, because we're only selling those," but if they made new ones, then more people would buy them, and then they would make different ones and different ones.

Changes in social relations. Differences in students' understanding of historical change were also apparent in their explanations for why people treat each other differently today than in the past. Although it would be hard to attribute changing ethnic or gender relations to new inventions, U.S. students did explain such changes by pointing to rational improvements in individual attitudes. They thought that discrimination against women and African Americans existed in the past because males and European Americans were "bossy" or "lazy" or "greedy," and change came about because people "figured it out, that everybody's equal to each other" (Barton 1997, p. 299; Barton 1996, p. 60). U.S. students particularly emphasized the role of famous individuals in bringing about change; as one student said, Martin Luther King "said a speech, and then everybody started realizing that the black people were the same as them,...they needed to treat them how they would want to be treated (Barton 1997, p. 300). For these students, changing social relations were little different than improved technology; their explanations focused on individual intentions and achievements and ignored societal factors such as social movements, economics, or the government.[4]

Again, students in Northern Ireland gave a wider range of explanations for these changes. The contexts in which they considered the issue were somewhat different than in the U.S., for neither gender nor ethnicity provided meaningful parallels to U.S. students'

[4]A number of other studies in both the U.S. and Europe have reached similar conclusions; see, for example, Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1992a), Lee, Dickinson, and Ashby (1995), Halldén (1986), and Carretero et al. (1994).

discussions.[5] For these children, the most salient change in the way people treat each other lay in the practice of caning. All children interviewed in this study knew that in the recent past, students were caned when they misbehaved at school. The practice was still current when some of their parents were children, and their grandparents were well acquainted with the custom. Many students recounted stories of their relatives' sufferings at the end of a cane, and when the P4 class in this study visited a historic school where they relived the experience of students in the 1950s, the possibility of being caned was the central topic of conversation for several days both before and after the trip. Although caning is a different topic than prejudice or discrimination, it nonetheless provides an example of a change in social relations—and an example about which all students were knowledgeable.

About a third of the students pointed to changes in attitudes as the exclusive reason teachers no longer cane children. P5 Dermot, for example, explained that "caning changed because people are getting kinder," and Y8 Alan said that "they didn't know that it was wrong to actually cane somebody...They just didn't think." Sometimes students' answers echoed their U.S. counterparts' explanations of rational progress in the development of ideas. P7 Carla, for example, said that caning changed "because over time they realized that they should be less strict," and P5 Natasha explained that "they just found out that it's really, really bad, and they're thinking of other people's feelings now." Several students pointed out that teachers no longer cane children because they found more effective punishments; P5 Joanna explained that detention is "learning them not to do that again because they're not going outside to play, and that's what normally everybody looks for," and P6 Siobhán explained, "They realized it wouldn't make the children stop doing it [misbehaving]...and it would just be better just to talk to the children, and they might

[5]Although students in Northern Ireland occasionally indicated that they were aware women were treated differently in the past than they are today, the subject was neither a part of the curriculum nor a topic that often arose in the course of conversation with students. (When I asked if people treated each other differently in the past, no student mentioned gender relations.) And while relations between Protestants and Catholics are parallel in some ways to ethnic relations in the U.S., that conflict is so far removed from resolution that it would make no sense to ask students about changes over time; it is the continuity—or deterioration—of community relations, rather than their improvement, that is most striking in Northern Ireland.

understand why not to do it." Just as U.S. students tended to think that people "figured out" that women and African Americans should be treated the same as everyone else, these students thought that teachers "realized" that they should be less strict, and that detention was a more effective punishment than caning.

But the other two thirds of students pointed to precisely the factors that were missing in U.S. students' explanations—collective action and changes in social institutions. Many students said that caning had changed because there had been changes in the law. P5 Jade, for example, thought that teachers caned children "because they didn't have any cops in them days," and P3 Joshua explained that "the law found out and the law changed it, it was against the law." Similarly, P5 Nathan thought that "now it's illegal to cane children," and his interview partner Connor agreed, saying, "Because if you cane them, you could get sent to jail...it's against the law to hurt somebody that you don't know." P7 Ronan noted that caning has changed "because there's human rights now, and they can't smack children with canes and stuff like that...There's laws now, and there's courts that will give lots of people says [i.e., a say] in human rights and stuff."

Many of these students pointed to the connection between changed ideas and collective action, or the institutional changes that result from collective action. At the simplest level, P5 Melissa said, "They would have told their mummies and their mummies would have done something about it"; several of the students in the P4 class I observed also thought that the practice changed because parents complained to principals, who made teachers stop. Many more students, though, pointed to the role of organizations and social institutions. P6 Benjamin pointed out, "They're not allowed to cane them now because the education board doesn't allow it" and observed that "the NSPCC [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] and people are going against caning people." Similarly, P7 Ailbhe thought that in the past, "No one had the power over the king, no one would dare challenge the king in groups or something," but now there's "the children's rights things, or cruelty to children thing, they were saying that they shouldn't be doing this to

children: you can punish them, but that's not the way to punish children now." And P6 Jeffrey explained that caning has changed because "new people came in, the new people respected the world and wanted to be a good person...and they made new rules like child abuse, like jails, and all that kind of thing." For these students, caning ended not just because attitudes changed, but because changing attitudes led to action which produced new laws and regulations. These dimensions of collective action and institutional change were almost completely lacking in U.S. students' explanations.

A similar pattern was evident whenever students in Northern Ireland tried to explain changing social relations. In the P6 classroom I observed, students learned that Viking women were married as young as twelve years old. When I asked students why the Vikings married so much earlier than people do today, some said simply that they were stupid or "thick," but others adamantly denied that explanation and attempted to place early marriages in their social and economic context. Several said Viking women married early so their families would get money; others explained that Viking men were away on raids and needed more housework done for them than people do today; others said that since people died earlier than today, they needed to marry earlier as well. Some students said the age of marriages had changed because people's attitudes had changed, but others pointed to changing laws or "rules" governing marriage. Again, students in Northern Ireland gave a more balanced set of explanations, which included not only individual attitudes but the social and institutional factors which U.S. students rarely mentioned.[6]

Direction of historical change. Another difference between students in Northern Ireland and the U.S. lay in their understanding of the overall direction of historical change. In two different studies, students in the U.S. described historical change not as a random, ambiguous, or cyclical process, but one of straightforward, linear, and generally beneficial

[6]Similarly, a number of students observed during interviews that in the past, people behaved more violently toward each other—in particular, they hanged people or "chopped people's heads off." When asked why that changed, students invariably said that it is now illegal. P6 Scott said that "laws came, then there was no law," P6 Nuala thought "they didn't have the law, they just hung people," and P6 Alice said, "There's laws in that time [Edwardian], and then [Norman] they could fight and kill whoever they wanted to."

progress (Barton, 1996; Barton and Levstik, 1996). In sequencing pictures from different times in history, U.S. students placed them in an "ideal" order, rather than in the more complicated combinations that actually occurred in the past; students consistently placed a picture of a large Antebellum city, for example, *after* a photograph of a family moving westward in the late 1880s. Their explanations invariably pointed to the more developed, more settled nature of the city—they explained that people first lived in places with grass and fields, and only later built cities. Students ordered pictures according to their belief that historical development occurred in a simple and progressive sequence; they thought that any time in history could be characterized by only one image, and that these images stood in a definite chronological order. Thus students thought that everyone in the Colonial Era lived in log cabins, and that all immigrants came to the U.S. at the beginning of settlement.

Students in Northern Ireland were much more likely recognize the diversity of images that could characterize any given time in the past. Two of the pictures students worked with during interviews were chosen specifically to match the ones U.S. students placed in the wrong order—a drawing of urban Belfast in the 1830s, and a photograph of a rural cottage in Co. Donegal in the 1890s. Only about half the students in Northern Ireland placed the 1890s picture before the one from the 1830s (compared to all U.S. students before the fifth grade, and half thereafter, who worked with the comparable pictures); their explanations mirrored those of U.S. students—they explained, for example, that the buildings in the 1830s picture were bigger than that in the one from the 1890s. Several other students, though, explained that the two pictures could be at the same time. P3 Morna, for example, thought they looked different "'cause they're different parts...that's the country and that's the city"; similarly, P4 Danielle thought they were the same time "'cause that's the town, and that's the country." Only one student in the U.S. studies—out of nearly a hundred students interviewed—made a similar suggestion.

When working with other pictures as well, students explained how different pictures could come from the same time. Y8 Deanna, for example, thought pictures from

the 1830s and 1780s might be the same time but "may be in different places, some places might be richer and some might be poorer, in different places." Similarly, P4 Drummond thought the people in Victorian and Edwardian pictures were wearing similar clothes, but those in the former were richer; Y8 Hamish also thought Edwardian and Victorian pictures could be from about the same time because "this one's poorer people, these ones are richer people." P6 Dylan thought pictures from the 1890s and 1900 might overlap in time as well; when arranging them, he asked, "Maybe, like could you put that halfway through, and then halfway through it you'd have another?" Asked to explain, he said, "You know the way you get one thing, okay? But you don't have to go all the way through it to get a new thing? Let's say, the thing could go on, but a new thing starts in the middle of that, and goes on, and then goes halfway." Like many of the students interviewed, Dylan recognized that change doesn't occur all at once, and that earlier "things" survive into later times.

Conclusions. These differences in children's understanding of historical change reveal a great deal about the differing contexts of learning in Northern Ireland and the U.S. In the U.S., children learn history as a story of national progress: They study the brave explorers who discovered a new land, the persecuted colonists who sought freedom, the hearty pioneers who settled the wilderness, and the visionary men who founded the nation and eventually freed the slaves. Alternative perspectives on U.S. history provide a more realistic picture, but they follow the same narrative chain: Explorers pillaged the new land; settlers murdered the natives; women, African Americans, and other groups fought for equality. And both approaches emphasize the achievements of individuals: Whether studying about Columbus and George Washington, or Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King, children learn that the noble heroes of the past made the U.S. what it is today. From either perspective, American history is a narrative, in which individuals initiate a series of events which follow in a causal chain. Both are stories of nation building, one more simplistic, one more complex, but both are about the origins of modern society and the state—and both are ultimately stories of progress.

Nor do U.S. students encounter this narrative only in the formal school curriculum: the historical images they experience outside school reinforce and even prepare them for the ory of national development. Before students begin school—much less before they begin studying history in fourth or fifth grade—they have been bombarded with images of Columbus, the pilgrims, Betsy Ross, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King. They see these figures on children's television programming, in commericals and advertisements, on placemats at restaurants; even the pictures on U.S. coins and bills tell the story of the country's history.[7] Students may have little specific knowledge of the historical role of these individuals, but they know they are the important figures in history that they will learn about someday. The emphasis on individual achievement is further reinforced by the television programs children watch: In the U.S., students report watching fictional dramas like *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, formats which necessarily tell the stories of individuals. Children in the U.S. also have access to a wealth of picture books, biographies, and novels that tell the story of real or fictional individuals in the nation's history—narratives about Columbus' exploration, teenagers fighting in the American Revolution, children during the time of slavery, or Jackie Robinson integrating baseball.

When U.S. students try to describe and explain change over time, they fall back on this narrative format for their accounts. They fail to recognize that large cities and new settlements existed at the same time, or that immigrants came to the U.S. long after the region was initially settled by Europeans, because these events do not match the idealized order of the narrative they are internalizing—first there were immigrants, then there were settlers, and then there were cities. Students emphasize the role of individuals in bringing about change because this too is a central component of the narrative they are learning—in the U.S., brave individuals fought for freedom and equality, they endured hardships to

[7]In the United Kingdom, coins and bills carry the portrait of the queen, and in Ireland they bear pictures of animals and musical instruments; one teacher there had a half-dollar chocolate novelty coin, and she asked me whether we really still had Kennedy's portrait on our money after he had been dead thirty-five years.

make a better life for themselves, they created new inventions to make life easier for everyone. And these all led to progress; although students no longer believe the U.S. has always been the world's bastion of freedom and opportunity, they do believe the country has steadily made progress in that direction—"We've figured it out," as they are fond of saying.

But this is not the story that children in Northern Ireland learn. In fact, when they encounter history, they do not learn a "story" at all. Students at each grade level study one or two specific times in history, and lessons focus on what life was like at that time—how people met basic needs, the organization of social life, their beliefs, and so on. There is neither an attempt to connect different topics into an overall narrative—either of world history, British history, or the history of Northern Ireland—nor is there a connected narrative within topics. Although most schools treat the required topics in P5 through P7 in chronological order, P4 and Y8 topics (The Recent Past and Roman Life), as well as many supplementary topics, do not conform to this order. Moreover, within each grade level, students learn about the social and material life of people at the time—they do not study narratives such as the "rise of Egyptian Civilization" or the "arrival and departure" of Vikings in Ireland. The entire focus of the curriculum is on learning about the lifestyle of people at different times in history and in different parts of the world. As a result, students are more likely to recognize that the same time can be characterized by more than one picture, and that historical images do not proceed in a simple, linear sequence of material advancement.

This focus on social life also makes students in Northern Ireland less likely to look to individuals achievements to explain historical change. Students study, in a simple way, the structure of society; they learn that people live differently because they are part of different societies. They rarely learn about famous people in history; athough reading books sometimes include stories of famous people—the P5 classroom I observed read about Guy Fawkes—such individuals were never mentioned during history instruction.

Students' experiences outside school reinforce this emphasis on society rather than individuals. Any number of captivating and well–designed history books for children are available in stores and libraries in Northern Ireland, but like the school curriculum, these focus almost exclusively on social and material life. It is easy to find picture books about life in a medieval castle or during the time of the Vikings or the Ancient Egyptians—even in the U.S., books like these are often imports or reissues of British books—but narratives of indvidual achievements, whether real or fictional, are much less common than in the U.S.; in fact, I never saw a child there reading such a picture book, and the only one I ever found in libraries, bookstores, or schools was about a Russian immigrant's journey to the U.S. Biographies and works of historical fiction (particularly those published in the Republic of Ireland), are more commonly available for older children, but these did not appear to be popular among students.

Watching television is also a significantly different experience for children in Northern Ireland than in the U.S. Although both British and Irish television stations sometimes air U.S.–produced historical dramas, these do not appear more than once a week. Television programming is more irregular than in the U.S., and thus children are less likely to develop the habit of watching the same show at the same time every day (or even every week); they are more likely to watch whatever is on—and frequently what is on are expository documentaries, including historical ones. Such doumentaries are much more prominent than in the U.S.: They are shown during prime time on the major networks and draw large audiences. As noted earlier, Northern Ireland students' descriptions of television learning tend to be general, and this is not surprising: They may have watched dozens of historical documentaries in their lives, but they have not watched *Little House on the Prairie* every day after school for the past five years. This exprience with expository documentaries rather than fictional historical dramas may reinforce students' tendency to look for societal explanations for change rather than focusing on individuals. One of the most popular such shows is an occasional series in which archeologists descend upon a

historic site for a lighting fast excavation over forty-eight hours; programs like this necessarily focus on uncovering details of life at another time, not on narrating the accomplishments of heroic individuals.

Finally, museums and history parks in Northern Ireland also focus on static portrayals of societies at different times in history rather than on narratives of national development. As noted earlier, these are important sources of historical knowledge for children in Northern Ireland; they also are one of the sources from which children are most likely to learn about their own region's past rather than the history of England or the Republic of Ireland. Significantly, nearly all such sites in Northern Ireland emphasize social and material life. While some present a chronological arrangement of their displays, even those avoid a connected narrative treatment, particularly of the events of the last four hundred years. This emphasis is easy to explain, for it is precisely the narrative of Northern Ireland's past that is at issue in current political debates. Any narrative inevitably involves assumptions—explicit or implicit—about the causes of the events recounted; causation is at the very heart of narrative structure and distinguishes narratives from simple "chronicles," or listing of events. But statements about causation in Northern Ireland's history are inevitably political statements—and political statements there have serious consequences. Telling any particular story about the past, even telling two or more stories side-by-side, will alienate a portion of the potential audience and could lead to political repercussions and a loss of funding. As a result, such sites do not try to tell stories; rather, they illustrate historical times. Nor do they emphasize the role of famous individuals: All individuals in the history of Northern Ireland are controversial, and therefore must be avoided. Museums and history parks in Northern Ireland are fascinating, engaging, and technically sophisticated—but to the extent they deal with change over time, they present chronicles, not narratives.

Purpose of history

These variations in the way history is portrayed in Northern Ireland and the U. S. also lead to significant differences in children's understanding of the reasons for learning about the past. In neither location do teachers (or television or museums) typically address the purpose of knowing history; as a result, students are left to develop their own inferences and conclusions about why the subject is important. For U.S. students, the purpose of history is to create a narrative that provides them with a sense of identity—history becomes a way of explaining their place in the world. In a study of fourth and fifth graders, Barton (1995) found that when students talked about the importance of history, they often pointed to the need to know about their individual pasts and those of their families; as they studied topics more remote in time and place, they referred to the foundation of the United States as a political unit, the creation of modern technology, and the origins of contemporary social relations. Moreover, students linked their individual identities to the broader society of which they were part: In describing significant historical events and patterns, students located themselves within a larger narrative—explaining not only where they fit into history but also how knowing about history helped them understand how to live in the present. These students consistently used pronouns such as "our" and "we" in talking about history; for them, history was important because it helped them understand how *our* country began and how *we* should treat each other. Reflecting the family contexts in which they had learned about the past, students thought they would one day hand this information down to their own children.

Other studies have yielded similar portraits of U.S. students' understanding of the reasons for studying history. In interviews with fifth graders, eighth graders, and secondary students, VanSledright (1997) found that many students thought history was a subject at school because it helped them understand how the country came to be; some older students also suggested that it helped them better understand their individual identities. The most common reason students gave for studying history, though, was that it

provided lessons for the present—by studying history, we can avoid the mistakes of the past. Similarly, in a study of fifth through eighth graders, Barton and Levstik (1998) found that students considered events to be historically significant if they were linked to the origin and development of the U.S. as a social and political entity, if they created or extended what students perceived as uniquely American freedoms and opportunities, or if they produced technological advances. Like the students in VanSledright's study, these students were confident that lessons could be learned from history, particularly from episodes which did not fit neatly into their image of social and economic progress.

These were not the reasons students in Northern Ireland gave for studying history. Few suggested that lessons could be learned from the past. The Y8 students were all from the same school, and they been explicitly taught that the purpose of history is to learn from the mistakes of the past; except for them, however, almost no students made such an observation. In only four other interviews did students suggest that they studied history to learn from the past, and the examples they gave were somewhat trivial: P6 Siobhán said history is important "so you know what's happened in the past, and so you don't do it, like washing in a big bowl [like the Vikings did]," and P6 Gary noted, "If we didn't know they didn't have manners or anything," we would do the same thing, "like when mom and dad says, 'The olden people do that, and not us, we're modern.'" The only other example given by a student was that knowing about history could prevent more world wars; others simply suggested "in case something was done wrong, it wouldn't happen again" (P7 Timothy) or "If you've made a mistake in the past, and don't know about it, you're going to make it again in the future." (Y8 Alan). Students in Northern Ireland rarely suggesed learning lessons as a rationale for history, and when they did so they were indefinite about what those lessons might be; U.S. students constantly offered that rationale, and illustrated it with specific examples.

Nor did students in Northern Ireland point to history as a way of establishing individual or collective identity. Some thought topics like the Vikings were important

because "they had a lot to do with the English, with fighting" (P6 Benjamin) or because "they're part of Ireland," (P7 Brenda) or even because "some people's ancestors might be Vikings," (P7 Timothy), but these students did not suggest that historical events provided themselves or anyone else with a sense of identity in the present. When talking about such topics they did not use first person pronouns—the *we* and *our* that are an indispensable part of U.S. students' discussions of history—and only one student explained the importance of a historical event the way U.S. students regularly do: P7 Amanda said World War II was important "because if the British people hadn't've fought in the war, we would have had a German leader, and it shows we fought for our rights." No other student made a similar comment about any event from either the British or Irish past; none linked themselves and their lives in the present to significant turning points in the history—not even when their relatives had taken part in events such as the world wars. A few students did mention that history was important in order to learn about one's ancestors; Y8 Leah, for example, thought history was important "to teach the younger children what happened to their ancestors, and about their history," and P6 Garrett said "If we didn't learn about our history we wouldn't know about our ancestors." But even when explicitly referring to their own ancestors in this way, students spoke not in terms of learning who they themselves were, but of learning about how other people—their ancestors—lived.

If the rationales of U.S. students were relatively unimportant to students in Northern Ireland, what did they think was the purpose of history? When asked directly, students gave a variety of answers. A few suggested that history "shows how lucky you are now" (Robin, P3) or that "it's good for us to know what they done...then you're thankful that we live like this, that we live in good warm clothes and friendly schools and all" (Linsey, P4). Others suggested more pragmatic reasons—you might get a job to do with history (like working in a museum), or you might need to know it on an exam. U.S. students sometimes give similar answers, although they are more likely to suggest

appearing on a quiz show than taking an exam as the most useful reason for studying history (Barton, 1995; VanSledright, 1997).

But the most frequent reason students gave for learning history was nearly the opposite of U.S. students' rationale: To learn about people who are different. Y8 Hamish put it succinctly: He said that history is important "to understand the way other people lived and went about their daily life." This theme ran throughout students' explanations of the rationale for studying both particular topics in history and the subject in general. When students were asked which pictures they thought were most interesting, most selected older pictures and explained their choices by pointing to the greater number of differences compared to today. P4 Jessica explained her choice, for example, by pointing out that "more things were different"; similarly, P4 Danielle thought two of the older pictures were interesting because "there's more stuff that you haven't seen nowadays, 'cause you don't usually see that stuff," and P7 Marie explained, "It shows how they were a long time ago, and you wouldn't know unless there had been a photograph of it, you wouldn't know what they looked like or anything."

Even more significantly, students consistently pointed to differences between past and present as the rationale for their interest in history in general. Explanations of this kind were so numerous that it would be difficult to report them all, but the following quotes provide some representative examples:

> It's lovely, it's wonderful to see what you haven't, what you've missed before you were born. (P3 Morna)
>
> We get to know what happened a long time ago, and that's very interesting, 'cause it's very kind of different than we do it now, so it is. (P4 Alexander)
>
> You might not know about them, and then you think, "Oh, class, they must be cool!" (P4 Kirsty)
>
> You get to learn about the past and what it used to be like, and what they did a long time ago, what they had that we don't. (P5 Nathan)
>
> You get to learn what it was like living in the past and how other people would feel and that, living then. (P6 Alice)

> It tells you what they were doing all years ago and what's like now and how different it was. (P6 Louise)
>
> It's very interesting because you learn what other people used to live like, not what we used to live like, and what they used to wear and how they used to act and all...because now we know how people act, but we didn't know how *they* act, and it's very interesting finding out about other people. (P6 Nuala)
>
> It just gives you a different point of view than ourselves to look at, it gives you what life was like then, not now. (P7 Patricia)
>
> You found out what sort of lifestyle they had [at the time of the famine], and you felt what they felt, and how many people died, and what was the causes and everything. (Y8 Susan)

Several students suggested that this kind of curiosity about people who were different is a basic human attribute. P6 Scott, for example, thought history was important "because if they were alive, they would want to know about us, and like say, in Africa they learn about us, and we learn about them." Similarly, P7 Carla said, "It's just interesting to know what it was like if we had been there, and people fifty years from now will be keen to know what it's like for us." And like U.S. students, many in Northern Ireland thought they would one day be responsible for passing on this information to others, either as a teacher or a parent. P5 Joanna, for example, said that "whenever you get older and you have kids, you can tell them what it's like, and if it does change, you can tell them what it was like whenever you were young." Similarly, P6 Louise mentioned that maybe someone would want "to know know what it was like and you'd be able to tell them," and her interview partner Colleen added, "Aye, if you'd want to be a teacher, you'd have to learn about all the stuff that happened years ago and then you could tell all the students." P5 Maura also suggested that "if you were doing something important, like if you were going to be like a history teacher, you'd have to remember all those things that people taught you when you were wee." P5 Liam gave the following justification for learning about history:

> You'd be wanting to know about the past, and if you grow up and then somebody asks you about history and you didn't learn, you'd be all, "What's that?"—asking questions—and if you learn it you'll just know it like that, and then you'll tell people about it, and you'll grow up and you'll want to be like what you are [the interviewer], telling people.

In the U.S., this intergenerational transmission of historical knowledge, combined with the story of national development that children encounter all around them, encourages them to see all history as their own story—their relatives tell them about their own past and that of their family, and schools and the rest of society tell them about the past of their country. These two stories become connected as students hear about their relatives' participation in the Vietnam War, or the U.S. Civil Rights movement, or the expanded opportunities for women during World War II. All history is about "us"; the only difference is that some content is recent and some is distant in time. But while children in Northern Ireland also learn about history from relatives, there is a fundamental break between their personal and family histories and the history they encounter in the rest of society. Outside the home, the history they encounter is about others, about people in other parts of the world or so far removed in time that it is difficult to see them as the forerunners of modern society. And because this history is not a story of national development, students have no reason to make the link it to their own identities. They think the purpose of history is to learn about others because so much of the history they encounter clearly *is* about others.

This is not to say that history plays no role in the formation of identity in Northern Ireland. Nothing could be further from the truth: The political conflict is inextricably linked to issues of identity, and these issues often revolve around history. The 1641 rebellion, Cromwell's actions at Drogheda, the Seige of Derry, the Penal Laws—for many people (and most politicians), these historical events provide crucial elements of their sense of self. The marches which inflame anger and violence each summer are commemorations of historical events. But precisely because these events are so important, so political, and so controversial, they are avoided at all costs in nonsectarian public forums and polite conversation. They certainly cannot be addressed in the primary school curriculum or in most museums or history parks. This ambivalence over the connection between history and identity became clear one day as I discussed the issue with a religiously mixed group of

teachers. Some suggested that history should help students form a sense of who they are, but many remembered their own early exposure to history, exposure which was designed precisely to give them a sense of identity—in sectarian terms. They knew they wanted to avoid that kind of identity , but there were unsure what might take its place.

Thus while many people in Northern Ireland eventually connect history to their sense of identity, the public settings in which children learn about the past rigorously avoid this connection. Primary students may be learning politicized stories of the national past at home or in their communities—although the complete absence of it in these interviews suggests it occurs later in adolescence—but these stories are not connected to the history they learn elsewhere. This is the crucial variable that accounts for the differences in students' understanding of the purpose for learning history in the U.S. and Northern Ireland. In the U.S., all sources of historical information reinforce the idea that history is about *us*: schools, television, families, holidays, museums all tell the story of the national past and encourage students to locate themselves within that story. Personal and public history are one and the same; even historical controversies in the U.S. revolve around identity—they are debates about who *we* are and how *we* got to be here. But in Northern Ireland, personal and public history do not reinforce each other; the public history children encounter at school, in museums, or on television is not connected to the experiences of their families or their religious communities. It is about others.

Conclusions

Although children in Northern Ireland and the U.S. learn about history from similar sources—school, relatives, historic sites, trade books, the media—the content of those sources differ so fundamentally that many underlying aspects of their historical understanding vary as well. One of the most obvious differences is in their understanding of historical evidence. Students in the U.S. have a very poor understanding of the

evidenciary basis of historical knowledge and tend to think that people know about the past because the information has been handed down by word of mouth. Most of the Northern Ireland students in this study, on the other hand, were quick to identify evidence as the source of historical knowledge, and they were able to give a number of specific examples. These differences arise both because evidence is an integral part of history instruction in Northern Ireland (while few students in the U.S. learn about such sources), and because the remains of the past are so much more evident in the immediate environment there; in the U.S., historic remains are either restored or destroyed.

Students in the two locations also differ in their understanding of the process of change over time. Those in the U.S. think change occurs in a linear and logical sequnce, and their images of the past exist in an idealized, storylike form. They also see change as a rational and beneficial process, one in which individuals bring about advances both in material life and social relations. Students in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, are more likely to identify the societal contexts of change, and are more likely to recognize that multiple images can characterize any given time. They are less likely to think that individuals are responsible for all changes in history, or that change is equivalent to progress. These differences result from the differing formats of history encountered by chidren in the two locations. In the U.S., students learn a narrative of national development, one which emphasizes the role of individuals and which takes progress almost as a given. In Northern Ireland, students learn about the nature of society at different periods in history; at the primary level, there literally is no "story," much less one of national development—there is a set of static portrayals of life in other times.

In these respects—the nature of evidence and of change over time—students in Northern Ireland have a more complete, more balanced understanding of history than students in the U.S. It is important not to overstate those differences. Students in Northern Ireland know what kinds of evidence are used in history, for example, but they have only rudimentary experience with questions of interpretation or perspective. They do not spend

most of their time analyzing and comparing historical evidence in order to reach conclusions. But they do sometimes—such issues are at least on the agenda, and students gain much more experience with historical interpretation than they would in U.S. classrooms at the equivalent grade levels.

Similarly, students' understanding of change over time is not entirely dissimilar to that of U.S. students. Quite a few of those in Northern Ireland also thought that pictures of cities must come after pictures of rural cottages. And some of them did think clothes are different now because people have discovered new materials like leather, or that students were caned because there were no photocopy machines in the past to duplicate detention slips. Nor is their understanding of societal institutions always very advanced—attributing changes to greater wealth shows only a beginning understanding of the role of economics in history. But the very fact that students gave explanations other than individual achievement points to the foundation of a more sophisticated understanding of historical change.

Students' understanding of the purpose for learing history is more difficult to evaluate. The difference is extreme: U.S. students think history is important to learn about ourselves, and those in Northern Ireland think it is important to learn about others. Neither perspective is necessarily more advanced or complete than the other, although that of Northern Ireland students is certainly refreshing: After having endured a nationalist approach to U.S. history as a student, a teacher, and a teacher educator, I was gratified to hear children saying they liked history because they got to learn about people who are different than themselves—and as a parent, I was thrilled to have my daughter learning about Mesolithic people for a few months instead of making more Thanksgiving turkey puppets. Given the diverse nature of U.S. society and the importance of the country in global relations, U.S. students would benefit from learning more about people who are different; at present, though, their belief that history must be about "us" is so strong that they tend to discount their few encounters with world history.

Students everywhere do not learn history the same way, but those differences go deeper than variations in content. U.S. students' identification with a story of national development affects their understanding of the nature and direction of change over time; students in Northern Ireland participate in a different historical context and reach different conclusions about how and why change has occured. The role of history in the wider society influences not only the content of the school curriculum but the kinds of history children encounter outside school, and that influence has an enormous impact on how students make sense of the past. As a result, accounting for students' knowledge of history is never a purely curricular issue. A curriculum which requires studying the social life of Mesolithic people and Vikings may help students in Northern Ireland reach a more sophisticated understanding of certain historical concepts, but such a curriculum could not be implemented in the U.S.—it would contradict widely shared social norms for the purpose of learning history. Broadening U.S. students' understanding likely must take place within the context of a story of national identity—any other approach appears doomed to failure. Improving history teaching and learning, then, requires recognition of the limitations—and the possibilities—of the social contexts of history education.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

In just a second, I'm going to show you two pictures from different times. What I'd like you to do is put the picture you think is from longest ago here (point to students' left) and the one you think is closest to now here (point to students' right). Then I'd like you to explain what makes you think one picture is older and one is newer. Do you have any questions before we start? [Show first two pictures.] Here are the first two pictures. Remember to put the one you think is closer to now here, and the one you think is longer ago here. [Wait for students to place pictures.] Explain why you think this one's older and this one's newer.

* * *

Now, I have some more pictures. I'm going to give them to you one at a time. For each one, tell me where you think it goes—in between two of them, or before, or after, or at about the same time as one of them. Explain why you put them where you did, just as you did with the first two pictures. Do you have any questions? Here's the next picture. [Show each picture, wait for students to place them, and then ask them to explain why they think one's older and one's newer.]

* * *

[Point to each picture] When do you think this is?

* * *

Did you think this was easy or hard to do? What things made it easy or hard?

Which pictures did you think were the easiest to figure out? Why?

Which pictures did you think were the hardest to figure out? Why?

Which pictures did you think were most interesting? Why?

If you were alive at this time, how do you think your life would be different than it is now?

Now I have some questions that aren't just about the pictures.

How do people know what happened a long time ago?

What are some of the main things that have changed over time? Why have things changed over time?

Why do you think people dressed differently in the past? Do you think they acted differently than they do now? Why? Do you think people treated each other differently in the past? Why?

What kinds of things have you learned about history or the past or long ago at school? Why do you think history is something you study at school? Why is it important?

Have you ever learned about history or the past or long ago anywhere other than at school?

Do you think learning about history or the past or long ago is interesting? Why?

Later on in school, like next year or when you get to secondary or grammar school, what do you think are some of the things you'll learn about in history? Can you think of any famous people or famous events that you think you'll learn about someday?

Appendix B

Number of Students Interviewed by Grade Level and School

	Integrated	Controlled	Maintained	Total
P3	10	0	0	10
P4	10	6	7	23
P5	12	6	8	26
P6	13	6	8	27
P7	9	6	8	23
Y8	8	0	0	8
Total	66	24	31	121